

Investigate the “Issues” in Chinese Students’ English Writing and Their “Reasons”: Revisiting the Recent Evidence in Chinese Academia

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Abstract

This research synthesis collected, compiled, and analyzed 29 academic research articles that were published in China in recent years. It addressed and explored the issues in Chinese undergraduate students’ English writing and the possible reasons causing and/or explaining the issues. It was discovered that many Chinese undergraduate students have difficulties applying the taught and learned English knowledge in English writing and have limited writing skills and strategies to write in English due to the negative influence of the curriculum and syllabus, the high-stake standardized tests, and the language environment in many Chinese universities. Suggestions were made to reinforce the understanding of Chinese students’ English writing practices in China and in the United States.

Keywords: English writing, Undergraduate English education, Chinese students, Issues, Reasons

1. Introduction

Proficiently writing in English is an important academic skill in undergraduate and graduate studies in universities in the United States. Students are required to effectively express personal opinions on academic topics, provide sufficient evidence to defend personal statements, construct writing pieces coherently and cohesively, and incorporate scholarship in a substantive manner in terms of lexicons, syntax, and discourses. Large components of assignments in higher education are in the form of writing, such as argumentative paper, lab reports, statements of purpose, weekly journals, rehashes, etc. Students’ written assignments are also a critical kind of criteria to evaluate their academic performance in the programs of study.

While the number of Chinese students studying in US universities is growing rapidly, it has been reported that Chinese students have certain problems, difficulties, and challenges in writing in English (Sun, 2014; He & Niao, 2015; Liu & Ni, 2015; Zhan, 2015). The students’ limited English writing proficiency in terms of writing skills, strategies, and perceptions to writing in English, negatively influences their academic learning, social interactions, and career development. Due to the widely recognized importance of proficiently writing in English, US universities have developed certain requirements for students’ English writing proficiency and provided various opportunities to help students improve English writing. Specific academic programs are designed for international students to develop necessary English writing skills and strategies, such as the English as a Second Language (ESL) composition courses in many US universities, which are provided as mandatory coursework for the groups of international students who are detected in need of explicit English writing instruction.

Many studies have reported and demonstrated Chinese students’ current English writing practices in the US universities (Nan, 2012; Jim, 2013; Wang & Machado, 2015;). On the other hand, understanding students’ past learning experience is an important way to reinforce our understanding of the issues in their current English writing practices. Since a large number of Chinese students in US universities are those who have completed or partially completed the four-year undergraduate studies in China, investigating the students’ English writing learning experience in undergraduate studies in China may provide us with useful and valuable information to better understand the struggles that Chinese students have in English writing when studying in universities in the US. However conventionally, limited attention was devoted to the work of Chinese scholars who conducted and published their research in Chinese academia. One of the most important reasons is the “language barrier”, which inhibits English-speaking scholars to explore the findings and evidence discovered in the contexts in Chinese universities but reported in Chinese language, as the research articles were written in Chinese.

As a native Chinese speaker, I am fluent in both Chinese and English. My intention is to collect and analyze the recent existing evidence in the Chinese publications and investigate the evidence that is helpful for non Chinese-speaking scholars. The goal of this secondary research is to provide additional information for English-speaking scholars to better understand the issues in Chinese students' English writing and the reasons that cause and/or explain the issues. With more sophisticated understanding of Chinese students' English writing practices in undergraduate studies in China, more effective instructional strategies and models may be developed to better support Chinese students' English writing in universities in the US.

2. Method

To guide the inquiry, selection, and further interpretation of the Chinese research articles, I formulated a preliminary research question: "What are the issues in Chinese undergraduate students' English writing and what are the reasons?" (中国大学本科英语写作教学中存在哪些问题及其原因?). Due to the generality of the Chinese language in meaning conveying, I broke down and specified the question to make the search for publications possible. The final guiding questions are:

- What are the issues that Chinese undergraduate students have in English writing in universities in China? (中国大学生在英语写作中有哪些问题?)
- What are the possible reasons that cause and/or explain the issues in Chinese undergraduate students' English writing? (哪些因素导致了中国大学生的写作问题?)

This research synthesis followed the conventional procedures of research synthesis modeled in Cumming, Lai, and Cho (2016). The strength of a research synthesis is to allow researchers to interpret and compare the different studies in terms of research purposes, designs, methodologies, contexts, participants, grade levels, as well as the quality of research and publications. The enlarged scope and breadth, and the diversified research designs can provide more comprehensive and balanced view on undergraduate English writing education in China.

In the next step, I started to search for recent publications in China, following the guiding research questions. Most of the search work was conducted in the major library in a local university. Considering the effectiveness and usefulness of the publications, the years of publication were narrowed down to the range of 2000 – 2016. The consulted database was the China Academic Journals Full-text Database (中国期刊全文数据库) in China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI, 中国知网), which is an online publishing platform for achievements of CNKI project and the most comprehensive gateway to access the publications in China (CNKI, 2014). In order to exclude irrelevant searching results, the subjects were limited to Category F (Literature/History/Philosophy: Foreign language) and Category H (Education & Social Sciences: Theory & Management of Education and Higher Education) before searching, which mainly focus on the areas of English linguistics and English education in the level of higher education. To improve the quality of the elicited results, the sources of research were limited to the Chinese Core (CC) and Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) journals. Dissertations (master's and doctoral) and non peer-reviewed articles before publication were not included. Additionally, in order to hear the voices from both researchers and teachers, non-empirical studies (e.g., teachers' reflections and self-attestations on teaching practices) were included, yet this type of work was used with caution. The two layers of keywords used for searching are listed in Table 1:

Table 1. Layers of keywords for publication searching

Layers	Keywords
First layer	“大学生”=undergraduate students “英语写作”=English writing
Second layer	“问题”=issues(s) “原因”=reason(s) “分析”=analysis/analyzing “研究”=research/study

The keywords were divided into two layers due to the relatedness to the research questions. When searching for publications, the first-layer keywords were treated as the “core words” and were always kept. The second-layer keywords were chosen based on specific purposes, so different keywords were used when searching for specific topics. For instance, when searching for articles focusing on the issues in Chinese undergraduate students' English writing, the keywords “大学生” (undergraduate students), “英语写作” (English writing), “问题” (issues), and “研究”

(research/study) were used. On the other hand, the keywords “大学生” (undergraduate students), “英语写作” (English writing), “原因” (reasons), “分析” (analysis/analyzing), “研究” (research/study) were chosen when the purpose of searching was to investigate the reasons for the issues in Chinese undergraduate students’ English writing.

When conducting the pilot test of downloading and viewing an article, it was found that two kinds of versions were available: the PDF and CAJ. The PDF was chosen in the first place but the downloaded document was broken. Some more PDF files were downloaded and examined, and it was discovered that they were usually either broken or of low quality (e.g., English words are not displayed in the articles). After consulting with a Chinese professor who is familiar with CNKI, I was recommended to install the CAJ Viewer software (free of charge due to the Open Access Policy) and download the articles in CAJ version. The CAJ Viewer was designed specifically for CNKI and the downloaded CAJs were all of high quality. Therefore, the CAJs were used in the later processes of the research synthesis.

After solving the problem of downloading and viewing articles, the next step was to begin the preliminary selection of elicited articles. The research questions guided this process. In the preliminary selection, the articles’ titles and abstracts were read and the ones that were related to the general research topic were downloaded. After selecting, 94 articles were collected in total. Secondly, each article was examined completely and the preliminary collection was pared down to 29 studies that were related to the central research questions and were of research value.

In further examination, the selected 29 studies were separated into three groups as (3) strong, (2) medium, or (1) weak, in terms of the research and writing quality. The criteria of quality determination were developed based on Creswell (2008) and Dörnyei (2007), concerning the research methods, analysis, trustworthiness, validity, and the quality of writing. However, since the guidelines for quality of research in Creswell (2008) and Dörnyei (2007) are developed for academic publications in the United States, they are not completely applicable for Chinese research. Some of the conventions in research design and article composition in China are different from the “Western style”. For example, most of the selected empirical research recruited many participants from different grade levels ($n \geq 50$), yet a large number of students participating in English writing research in China is considered to be normal. A possible reason may be the large-sized English classrooms (usually 50-100 students) in Chinese universities. In addition to the size of samples, perhaps due to the limitation of layout and academic writing conventions, the Chinese articles are usually much shorter in writing and briefer in discussing and introducing theoretical frameworks, past related research, and the methods of conducting the studies. Therefore, the guidelines were adapted, and the selected 29 articles were categorized into the following groups, in Table 2:

Table 2. Categorization based on quality of research

Quality of research	Number of articles	Guiding criteria
(3) Strong	9	Empirical or not; sample size; sample diversity; research instruments; sources of data; duration of data collection;
(2) Medium	12	sophistication of data analysis; validity of interpretation;
(1) Weak	8	potential for generalizability; limitations; and quality of writing (based on Creswell, 2008; Dörnyei, 2007).

Two Chinese assistant professors with the research focus on second language writing were invited to evaluate the quality of the selected articles based on the adapted criteria. The evaluation was conducted individually and our results were compared and discussed. 27 out of the 29 (93%) articles of the evaluation matched. The triangulation ensured the validity of the categorization of the research quality.

Since this research synthesis aims to address both the “issues” and “reasons” in Chinese undergraduate students’ English writing, an additional categorization is needed. After further reading the studies, the 29 articles were divided into three groups as “issues only”, “issues + reasons”, and “reasons only”, according to the focus/foci of each research. The “issues” here refer to the mistakes, challenges, and difficulties Chinese undergraduate students have in English writing, and the “reasons” are the possible causes and explanations to the “issues”. Therefore, the “issues only” group reported the “issues” in students’ writing without addressing the accounting factors while the “reasons only” group solely focused on the causes and explanations. The “issues + reasons” group consisted of the research that studied the “issues” in Chinese students’ English writing and also attempted to reveal the possible causes and explanations. Table 3 demonstrates the classification of the focus/foci of the selected research in each category of quality of research:

Table 3. Focus/foci of research in each category of quality of research

	“Issues only”	“Issues + reasons”	“Reasons only”	In total
(3) Strong	2	5	2	9
(2) Medium	1	5	6	12
(1) Weak	1	2	5	8
In total	4	12	13	29

In general, Table 2 demonstrates that most of the 29 studies were of mid and high quality. Most of the (3) Strong and (2) Medium groups of studies provided empirical and/or concrete samples, examples, and discussions about the “issues” and “reasons” in Chinese undergraduate students’ English writing. The (1) Weak group contributed mainly to reflection and analysis of the English writing education in Chinese undergraduate studies by practitioners. Table 3, on the other hand, reveals that the majority of the studies focused on the “issues + reasons” and “reasons” of the “issues”. Due to the availability of evidence from the sources, this research synthesis will provide more claims regarding “reasons” than “issues”. In the next part, the major findings that were discovered after reading, analyzing, compiling, and synthesizing the selected research articles will be addressed.

3. Results

Generally, the selected research works involved a large number of participants with diverse characteristics, including students from grade one to three in undergraduate studies, English teachers, and native English speakers. Among the students, both English-major students and non English-major students were included. The non English-major students came from diverse disciplines of studies: Chinese language arts, law, business, chemistry, biology, computer science, etc. The data was collected not only from students and teachers, but also writing samples from students’ homework, in-class writing practices, standardized tests, and other assignments. Different genres that are commonly practiced in academic writing were studied, such as informative, argumentative, and expository writing. All research was conducted in government-funded, four-year, public universities, which consist of the major body of higher education in China. In these universities, students take different kinds of English (writing) courses based on the requirements of their programs, but in general, the English-major students take Professional English courses that have higher benchmarks than the Public English courses for non English-major students. The Professional English courses are designed specifically for English-major students, while comparatively, the Non English-major students from different disciplines are mixed together to take Public English courses. Writing samples from both Professional English courses and Public English courses were analyzed in the selected studies. The methods of data collection were diverse, including questionnaires, observations, interviews, text analyses, and case studies. The Appendix summarizes the focus/foci of the research, the population in each study, the participants’ characteristics (position, grade level, and major), the writing samples, and the research quality.

This research synthesis investigated the “issues” in Chinese undergraduate students’ English writing and the possible causes and explanations by investigating a collection of multi-faceted and inter-connected factors that were demonstrated, studied, and analyzed from diverse sources in undergraduate contexts. The research collectively supported the following findings of the “issues” and “reasons” in Chinese undergraduate English writing education.

Finding 1: (Issue) Chinese undergraduate students have difficulties applying the taught and learned English knowledge in English writing

A number of research (9 out of 29 in total and out of 16 in “issues only” plus “issues + reasons”) demonstrated the mistakes and challenges that Chinese undergraduate students make and have in English writing, in terms of lexicons, grammar, syntax, and pragmatics. For instance, many spelling and written mistakes can be found in Chinese undergraduate students’ English writing, and one of the interpreted causes is that Chinese undergraduate students have limited skills in transforming the receptive vocabulary into productive vocabulary so as to sufficiently and appropriately explain, argue, and defend situations, opinions and ideas in English writing (Cai & Fang, 2006; Du, 2001; Ma, 2004; Wei, 2010; Wu 2001; Zhang, 2005). Although they have encountered, learned, and acquired a large number of lexicons in previous English studies, Chinese undergraduate students were not able to pragmatically use the learned vocabulary and diversify the lexical choices in their English writing (Du, 2001; Li & Guo, 2013; Ma, 2004; Wei, 2010; Zhang, 2005). By analyzing students’ writing samples, researchers found that Chinese undergraduate students’ lexical and grammatical applications in English writing are restricted to the most common and widely used ones (Du, 2001; Ma, 2004; Wu, 2001; Zhang, 2005). Interestingly, Wang (2010) stated that Chinese undergraduate students choose to use the most familiar lexicons, grammatical patterns, and syntactical structures, and

avoid using unfamiliar ones to diversify language utilization. Moreover, Hou (2002) claimed that his students have limited skills in applying the learned English knowledge for pragmatic purposes. This statement was supported by Ma (2004), Xu et al. (2004), and Lyu (2013). In addition to the students' difficulties in pragmatic uses, Xu et al. (2004) reported that their students have difficulties in applying the learned grammatical patterns in unfamiliar texts for different purposes, and Lyu (2013) demonstrated that the Chinese undergraduate students, especially the non English-majors, are good at finishing writing for tests, but struggle in collecting, reading, and using sources to support writing, as well as writing for communicative purposes (e.g., expressing personal feelings, sharing information, connecting social relationships, etc.). After analyzing the collected students' writing samples, Du (2001) revealed the common mistakes in students' English writing and concluded that the mistakes are resistant and can last for a long time (e.g., some lexical mistakes were detected to last for more than two years).

Finding 2: (Issue): Chinese undergraduate students have limited writing skills and strategies to write in English

Besides the difficulties in applying learned knowledge, 10 articles (out of 29 in total and out of 16 in "issues only" plus "issues + reasons") claimed that Chinese undergraduate students also create problematic writing pieces in English due to limited writing skills and/or the lack of effective writing strategies. Specifically, the lack of coherence and cohesion in Chinese undergraduate students' English writing was identified by many studies (Du, 2001; Jian et al., 2003; Li & Guo, 2013; Wang, 2009a; Wu, 2001), and Tan (2005) reported that a large proportion of the students has difficulties with writing coherently and cohesively due to the lack of English writing strategies in coherence and cohesion. The incoherent and incohesive writing pieces will sometimes strongly impede understanding of the content by Chinese English teachers and other evaluators (Du, 2001; Jian et al., 2003; Wu, 2001; Wang, 2009a) and will make the content even harder to be understood by native English speakers (Zheng & Chang, 2014). Furthermore, research also demonstrated the logical problems in Chinese undergraduate students' English writing (Li, 2002; Li & Guo, 2013; Wang, 2009a; Wei, 2010; Wu, 2001). The logical problems consist of the omission of logical connections and conjunctions among sentences and chunks (Li, 2002; Liu & Guo, 2013), the weaknesses and insufficiency in reasoning and argumentations (Li, 2002), and the inconsistence in the connection of ideas in the passages (Wang, 2009a; Wei, 2010; Wu, 2001). The students' writing samples showed that Chinese undergraduate students have difficulties to effectively elaborate and argue personal statements, provide sufficient and persuasive evidence and information to support opinions, ideas, and beliefs, and organize language chunks to construct smoothly-flowing structures in English writing (Li, 2002; Liu & Guo, 2013; Wang, 2009a). Despite the problems in structure and logical reasoning, Cai and Fang (2006) reported that Chinese undergraduate students do not have ample knowledge in different genres since the kinds of genre that they encountered in English writing studies are limited.

In addition, Jian et al. (2003) and Zheng and Chang (2014) revealed the problems in Chinese undergraduate students' English writing strategies. Both studies found that in English writing, the students usually firstly construct the content in Chinese (either generate ideas in mind or write down some hints on paper) and then directly translate Chinese into English. Jian et al. (2003) also discovered that the time limit would also affect students' writing. Many English writing practices in undergraduate studies in China are time-limited and students are required to complete writing in a limited amount of time. While many Chinese students become accustomed to complete writing in a short time, they sometimes compose writing pieces that are incoherent and logically problematic, since the students assume that "the readers already know what the writer knows" (problematic writer-reader relationship). Therefore, Jian et al. (2003) suggested that effective English writing strategies should be taught, and ample time should be provided for practice to help the students improve English writing. On the other hand, Zheng and Chang (2014) reported that the students have problematic strategies in the process of writing, as their major focus is the correctness of the basic linguistic elements, especially lexicons and grammar, whereas the content of the writing is neglected. Even if there are few lexical or grammatical mistakes, the content of some writings is hollow and the logical connections among chunks are weak.

Finding 3: (Reason) Current curriculum and syllabus could be important reasons for the issues in undergraduate students' English writing

A number of research (10 out of 29 in total and out of 25 in "reasons only" plus "issues + reasons") addressed the possible problems in current curriculum and syllabus in English writing education in undergraduate studies in China. Many studies reported that too much emphasis and resources are devoted to teaching and learning English reading while English writing has been neglected (Chen, 2016; Guo 2006; Li & Li, 2004; Liu, 2010; Liu et al., 2003; She, 2003; Wei, 2010). Specifically, it was found that in many Chinese universities, English reading and writing are usually combined together. Namely, there are no courses designed specifically to teach and learn English writing. Instead, English writing is integrated in English reading courses, and this is especially true for the non English-majors (Chen, 2016; Guo, 2006; Liu, 2010; Liu et al., 2003; Lyu, 2013). Due to the limited time of

instruction and the pressure from the requirements of curriculum and syllabus, English teachers usually have to focus more on teaching reading and spend very limited time teaching writing. Consequently, Chinese undergraduate students do not have ample time and opportunities to learn and practice writing in English (Chen, 2016; Guo, 2006; Li & Li, 2004; Liu, 2010; Liu et al., 2003; Lyu, 2013; Wei, 2010; She, 2003). As one of the negative consequences, many Chinese undergraduate students do not value English writing and neglect the importance of learning and practicing writing in English (Li, 2007; Li & Li, 2004; Wei, 2010). Du (2001) and Wu (2001) discovered that the proportion of time used to teach and learn English writing in classes is very low (less than 20%). Besides, the continuity of English writing instruction through one semester and through undergraduate English education in many Chinese universities cannot be guaranteed. Furthermore, Wu (2001) and Hou (2002) stated that the benchmarks of lexical knowledge in current curriculum are not high enough to fulfill English writing needs in the modern society. The number of lexicons that are required to be mastered by students in the curriculum is too few, comparing to other learning-English-as-a-foreign-language countries, such as Japan and Russia.

On the other hand, the current used textbooks are also criticized by researchers and practitioners. While reading and writing are integrated as combined components in some textbooks, the content and requirements for writing are far too less and lower than those for reading (Cao et al., 2011; Chen, 2016; Hou, 2002; Liu et al., 2003; Wang, 2009b). As a result, English writing is not valued in the process of instruction due to the content-imbalanced textbooks. Additionally, Cao et al. (2011) further claimed that some textbooks are “out-of-date” as they do not address the modern topics and match the English writing requirements in the modern society. In addition, some textbooks only provide writing samples for test preparation, so a significant weakness of this kind of textbooks is the lack of conveying English writing knowledge and skills for pragmatic communicative usage, which consequently restricts students’ autonomy of applying learned knowledge in English writing for non-test purposes.

Finding 4: (Reason) The high-stake standardized tests have negative washback on English writing education

High-stake standardized tests usually have profound influence on society and education, known as “washback” (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). Many studies (10 out of 29 in total and out of 25 in “reasons only” plus “issues + reasons”) demonstrated the negative washback of the two high-stake standardized English tests that Chinese undergraduate students are required to take and pass: College English Tests (CET). The CETs are designed to measure the English ability of the non English-majors in undergraduate studies, and all non English-major students are required to take both tests: CET-4 and CET-6. It was found that many teachers and students set up teaching and learning goals only based on the requirements of the CETs and their teaching and learning practices are designed solely with the purposes of preparing and passing the tests. Consequently, the in-class instruction only focuses on writing skills, knowledge, and strategies that are required for the CETs but ignores the English writing ability that is needed for communication, cooperation, expression, and argumentation in daily life and workplaces (Chen, 2016; Hou, 2002; Liu et al., 2003). Some studies further demonstrated the negative influence of the CETs on students’ learning practices. For example, Cai (2002) reported that since the CETs focus more on linguistic correctness than the richness of content, Chinese students mainly focus on checking the lexical and grammatical usage during composing and editing, but neglect the importance of providing sufficient evidence and information to enrich the content and revise the organization to avoid incoherence and incohesion. Cai (2002) also claimed that Chinese undergraduate students are negatively influenced by the CETs because the length requirements in CET writings are too short (120 words for CET-4 writing and 150 words for CET-6 writing), which inhibits students’ ability to write longer passages after repetitive practice to write CET essays. Moreover, in Tan’s study on students’ writing behavior and self-reflection, it was revealed that analyzing and imitating the CET writing samples is a common way of learning English writing by Chinese undergraduate students (Tan, 2005). However, the students put too much effort on studying and practicing English writing following the CET samples, which consequently diminishes students’ autonomy and creativity in English writing. Moreover, after a cross-sample analysis of comparing students’ writing in different grades, Lin (2009) demonstrated the existence of a “vocabulary highland” in productive vocabulary in Chinese undergraduate English writing. The “vocabulary highland” phenomenon refers to the special lexical knowledge improvement in Chinese undergraduate students’ sophomore year of English study and a sudden drop of ability in the junior year. Lin interpreted this phenomenon as students devoting much more time to practice English writing to prepare for CETs in the sophomore year but neglecting English writing studies in the junior year, once having passed the CETs (Lin, 2009).

Finding 5: (Reason) Limited amount of high-quality English input and the negative influence of native language impede learning English writing

The negative influence of context and first language (L1) are reported by researchers and teachers (17 out of 29 in total and out of 25 in “reasons only” plus “issues + reasons”). The contextual factors that inhibit English writing

learning include the large-sized classrooms, problematic teaching pedagogies, and the L1-only linguistic environment. Many studies stated that the large-sized classrooms, usually with 70-100 students in one classroom for non English-majors from different disciplines, negatively impacts the quality of teaching and learning, since it is almost impossible for the classroom teacher to fully understand and fulfill students' diverse needs (Chen, 2016; Liu, 2010; Liu et al., 2003; Lyu, 2013; She, 2003; Wei, 2010). With so many students in the classrooms, teachers have limited options choosing appropriate teaching strategies and methods, and finally, they have to choose the most traditional yet widely criticized teaching method: lecturing. The consequences of the large-sized classroom include the far distance between teachers and students, the tedious teaching and learning atmosphere, product-oriented teaching strategies, and students' loss of motivation and negative attitude toward learning English writing, which all together impede Chinese students learning and practicing writing in English (Chen, 2016; Liu, 2010; Liu et al., 2003; Lyu, 2013; She, 2003; Wei, 2010).

On the other hand, some pedagogy implemented in English writing classes in Chinese undergraduate classrooms is believed to be problematic. Cao et al. (2011) demonstrated that the students only write to complete required writing tasks but they are lack of autonomy, creativity, and motivation due to the product-oriented teaching. Liu et al. (2003) and She (2003) criticized the teaching and learning practices in English writing classes that mainly and/or even solely focus on studying the CET samples and practicing CET writings. Moreover, She (2003) and Wei (2010) reported that there are limited opportunities for teachers and students to cooperate, interact, discuss, and share teaching and learning needs, experiences, feelings, achievements, and tasks in English writing classes. Cai and Fang (2006), Liu (2010), and Wang (2009b) documented that the teachers and students put too much effort in teaching and learning specific linguistic knowledge, especially vocabulary and grammar, but neglect other forms of knowledge and skills that are also important in English writing, such as structural organization, logical reasoning, genre knowledge, and writing for communicative purposes.

In addition, some studies claimed that the L1-only linguistic environment does not support English writing teaching and learning. After analyzing the collected data through surveys and interviews, Zheng and Chang (2014) reported that the Chinese-dominant in-class and out-of-class environment may not only suggest that learning English writing is not useful but also confuse the students for the purposes of English writing, especially for the non English-majors, as a student questioned: "Am I writing in English for Chinese readers or native English speakers" (Zheng & Chang, 2014)? On the other hand, Cai and Fang (2006) and She (2003) claimed that the L1-only environment inhibits English writing learning because both high-quality English comprehensive input and opportunities for English output are limited in undergraduate English writing education in China, which are pivotal for second/foreign language learning.

Furthermore, much research revealed the negative and strong influence of students' L1 on English writing. By analyzing students' writing samples, researchers demonstrated that many mistakes that students make in English writing are the results of negative transfer of L1, such as inappropriate vocabulary, invented words, fragments, run-on sentences, mistakes in tenses, incoherence and incohesion, weak and/or problematic logical reasoning, etc. (Du, 2001; Kang, 2008; Lyu, 2013; Ma, 2004; Shuang, 2005; Wang, 2009a; Wei, 2010). Jian et al. (2003), Wang (2009a), and Zheng and Chang (2014) specifically analyzed the students' writing process, writing samples, and students' self-reflections, and concluded that Chinese undergraduate students would firstly think and compose in Chinese and then translate Chinese into English. Consequently, a large number of "Chinglish" (which refers to the written and/or spoken language that is produced in English but follows Chinese express conventions, thus is problematic for native English speakers to understand) was written.

4. Discussion

The research evidence and analysis above are sufficient for further implication and discussion about the English writing education in Chinese undergraduate studies. Firstly, the "issues" in Chinese students' English writing and the "reasons" are interrelated and always affect each other. For example, Chinese students' limited ability in applying learned knowledge and insufficient knowledge in English writing skills and strategies, as "issues", are influenced by many factors, including curriculum and syllabus, large-sized classrooms, problematic pedagogies, learning strategies, students' personal attitudes and motivation, washback of CETs, etc., and the accounting factors also influence one another to result in the consequences of problematic writing. From the language socialization perspective (Duff & Talmy, 2011), the Chinese undergraduate students are not only learning the English language but also the social and cultural knowledge through the English language while learning and practicing writing in English. The students are implicitly and sometimes explicitly influenced by beliefs and philosophies of teaching and learning English writing from educators, teachers, peers, and the society in their four-year undergraduate studies. Therefore, the finished writing works are a form of reflection of the consequences of language socialization. To help students improve their

English writing requires the understanding, and more importantly, the intervening and reconstructing of the language socialization in English writing education in universities in China and in the United States.

Secondly, it may be helpful for American researchers and teachers to understand the following findings revealed in this research synthesis to better understand Chinese students and their English writing. Firstly, Chinese students have long been used to the learning atmosphere in which teaching and learning are guided by the requirements of high-stake standardized tests. It is common for Chinese students to “study for the tests”: They will value the scores of tests and grades of assignments; spend much effort to learn the knowledge that is test-required; demonstrate high motivation to prepare for tests but lose motivation in English writing quickly once they pass the tests; and perform well in tests but are lack of creativity and autonomy in other assignments, etc. Moreover in English writing, Chinese undergraduate students are accustomed to the writing tasks that are short in length (less than 200 words), fixed in structure (beginning – three supporting ideas - conclusion), and limited in topics and tasks (e.g., convey personal beliefs based on a topic, argue between two alternatives, etc.). Additionally, They are used to the “writing strategies” with which they would firstly compose in Chinese and then translate into English; focus more on the accuracy of lexicons and grammar and ignore the coherence, cohesion, organization, pacing, logic reasoning, and content richness; and accustomed to the teacher-controlled, product-oriented, and task-based teaching and learning environment.

Moreover, there are two basic groups of Chinese students who receive different English writing instructions in undergraduate studies: the English-majors and non English-majors. Although it is not the main focus of this research synthesis, two studies compared the English writing education, English writing practices, and students’ attitudes towards English writing between the two student groups (Cai & Fang, 2006; Wang, 2010). Comparatively, it was found that non English-majors: 1) Have fewer opportunities to learn and practice English writing; 2) spend less time on learning English and English writing; 3) are evaluated based on lower benchmarks; 4) are taught mainly to prepare and pass the CETs (English-majors take Tests for English Majors instead of CETs); and 5) have more negative attitudes towards English writing and learning to write in English, such as the confusion of the target readers, the struggle of whether or not developing personal voices in writing, and questions of the pragmatic purposes of learning English writing and writing in English. I tried to search for more research that compares these two populations of Chinese undergraduate students, but limited information was found. Thus, additional in-depth studies are encouraged to explore and compare the two groups of students’ different performance in English writing, such as their writing strategies, motivation, attitudes, and language proficiency. It may also be helpful for scholars to have better understandings about the undergraduate English writing education in Chinese universities by investigating and comparing the English writing development trajectories of the English-majors and non English-majors in the four years undergraduate study. On the other hand, although it may be premature to claim that the performance in English writing between English-majors and non English-majors will be significantly different when both groups of students come to study in universities in the US, I think it is legitimate to predict the struggles and challenges that many non English-majors may have in English writing when studying in US universities.

Finally, the following suggestions are made based on the findings of this research synthesis in order to help American educators, researchers, and teachers to better support Chinese students’ English writing. First of all, understanding the pragmatic purposes of English writing may be the first step to motivate Chinese students to learn, practice, and set appropriate goals for learning English writing. While Chinese students are used to product-oriented and “finish-and-forget” modes of learning, they may become more actively engaged in the English writing learning processes and be more willing to participate in further studies once they realize the purposes of learning. Secondly, a warm learning environment and a close teacher-student relationship may be welcomed by Chinese students, comparing to the “tedious” classroom atmosphere and “far-away” teachers they had in undergraduate studies. Moreover, it could be problematic to label all Chinese students as “unsuccessful English writers”. There should be no surprise about how significantly diversely the Chinese students would perform in English writing due to different past learning experiences. Therefore, teachers should avoid certain prejudice and stereotypes in teaching English writing to Chinese students. In addition, systematic, explicit, and comprehensive instruction on writing knowledge, skills, and strategies may be beneficial. Due to the limitation in undergraduate English writing education, especially in academic writing, many Chinese students struggle with appropriately writing academic pieces, adequately expressing personal opinions, and efficiently arguing and defending statements. Explicit instruction on lexical and syntactic choices, structural analysis, genre knowledge, and conventions and idiomacticity in academic writing, as well as large amount of writing practices may be helpful for Chinese students to quickly adapt to the university studies in the US.

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Note: The reviewed articles are marked with *.

Appendix. Focus/foci of research, number of participants, characteristics of participants, number of writing samples, and the quality rating of the synthesized research

Research focus/foci	Research	N	Participants	Writing sample	Research quality
“Issues only”	Li (2002)	50	G2, EM	50	3
	Liu & Guo (2013)	64	G2, NEM	64	2
	Xu, Xia, & Lyu (2004)	86	G1, EM	82	3
	Zhang (2005)	N/A	N/A	N/A	1
“Issues+reasons”	Cai & Fang (2006)	537	G2, G3, & G4, EM (335), NEM (98)	N/A	3
	Du (2001)	N/A	N/A	N/A	2
	Hou (2002)	N/A	N/A	N/A	1
	Jian, Lu, & Pan (2003)	N/A	G1 & G2	120	3
	Lyu (2013)	N/A	N/A	N/A	2
	Ma (2004)	116	G1, NEM	120	3
	Tan (2005)	60	G2, NEM	30	2
	Wang (2009a)	N/A	G1 & G2	150	2
	Wang (2010)	128	G2, NEM (64)	128	3
			G3 & G4, EM (64)		
	Wei (2010)	N/A	N/A	N/A	2
	Wu (2001)	N/A	N/A	N/A	1
	Zhang & Chang (2014)	86	G2, EM (33); T (42); NS (11)	N/A	3
“Reasons only”	Cai (2002)	N/A	T	N/A	2
	Chen (2016)	N/A	N/A	N/A	2
	Guo (2006)	N/A	G1 & G2, NEM	N/A	1
	Kang (2008)	N/A	N/A	N/A	2
	Li (2007)	210	G2, NEM	N/A	3
	Li & Li (2004)	330	G1 & G2 (282); T (48)	N/A	3
	Lin (2009)	N/A	G1, G2, & G3, EM	60	2
	Liu (2010)	N/A	N/A	N/A	1
	Liu (2012)	N/A	G1& G2	N/A	1
	Liu, Zhou, & Cao (2003)	N/A	N/A	N/A	1
	She (2003)	335	G2	N/A	2
	Shuang (2005)	N/A	N/A	N/A	2
	Wang (2009b)	N/A	N/A	N/A	1

Abbreviations in Participants: English-majors = EM, Non English-majors = NEM, Teachers = T, Native speakers = NS, Freshman = G1, Sophomore = G2, Junior = G3, Senior = G4

Research quality: 3 = (3) Strong, 2 = (2) Medium, 1 = (1) Weak, as demonstrated in Table 2